

INVISIBLE FOUNDATIONS: CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN EN EL HOYO
CIMIENTOS INVISIBLES: TRABAJADORES DE LA CONSTRUCCIÓN EN EN EL HOYO
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Abstract

In 2003, the filmmaker Juan Carlos Rulfo began to document the construction of what was to be the longest elevated highway in Mexico City. Running above the peripheral highway called *Anillo Periférico*, the elevated was meant to relieve heavy traffic in certain areas of Mexico City and move thousands of vehicles at a greater speed. This public megaproject inspired Rulfo to anchor the plot of his documentary around the lives of some of the more than 7,000 workers who labored on the construction of this elevated highway. This paper analyzes the documentary *En el hoyo/In the Pit* (Rulfo, 2006) in order to more closely address the role played by construction workers, a voiceless guild in the history of construction in Mexico, through an architectural work that in its time was a symbol of urban development. It explores the visual mechanisms used in the film to represent reality. Using the notion of countervisuality—a term belonging to the field of visual studies—the paper assesses whether or not the documentary is an attempt to set up a counter hegemonic vision of architecture by directly engaging with the practices and ideologies pertaining to architecture and urban development. The paper concretely alludes to practices and ideologies related to the lives of a subaltern group that makes it possible to construct large-scale public works.

Keywords: Countervisuality, Construction Workers, Documentary Film, Elevated Highway

1 Introduction

Social and economic models see architecture and urban development as important fields of expression. Society disseminates and assimilates ideological and political significations by drawing on the spatial materiality of the constructed object, making use of scale, or modifying public space, to mention only a few aspects. In its simplest application, after Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams (2003, p. 160, our translation) recalls that the notion of hegemony is linked with the political domination of the relationships between the state and social classes. However, the nature of this domination is understood in its broadest sense, given that “it is not limited to issues related to direct political control, but rather to attempts to refer to a more general domination, the key features of which include a specific way of perceiving the world, nature, and human relationships.” The way of perceiving the world that this concept refers to implies that the determining factors of the hegemonic or dominant order are able to find expression through a spectrum of means spanning from institutions to relationships of consciousness in such a way that the message is conveyed as if it were “common sense” or “normal reality.”

For Gramsci, hegemony assumes that social life is oriented in a way that is laid out by the dominant groups through indirect relationships in which a “set of superstructures” mediates the sphere of production. These are superstructures located in political society (government and state administration) and civil society (private organizations and institutions) that set up belief systems and forms of consciousness (Gramsci, 1986, p. 357, our translation). The domination to whom the hegemony refers to alludes to the experience and form of consciousness acquired by a government model, such as a comprehensive form that permeates cultural factors or social practices through the mass media, education, and other means, for instance. These factors or practices establish a dominant view, i.e., a view defined by the parameters of a hegemonic group. It should be noted that one of the mechanisms for maintaining this hegemony is the consensus expressed through agencies of public opinion (Gramsci 1981, p. 124). Similarly, Gramsci views the consensus of the broader masses of small-scale farmers as a tool through which the working class can become a dominant class, since the class alliances on which consensus is based would enable mobilizations against capitalism and the bourgeois state (Gramsci, 2013, p. 285, our translation).

Within this context, architecture is intertwined within hegemony, since it is an expression of dominant ideas regarding space that, in general, respond to the needs of the dominant classes. In megacities of the Global South, the hegemonic image of the neoliberal city is imprinted in urban landscapes constituted by glass skyscrapers and monumental works that imply a challenge for engineering. The skyscraper, for instance, is a sign of power expressed in form and dimension, materially expressing the capital used for its construction, as well as the economic relations and relationships of power that unfold within the building. Architecture and urbanism are therefore fields in which hegemony can be repeatedly perceived and

reconfigured. However, things are different when we think of space in terms of counter hegemonic configurations, i.e., forms, actions, or visions that confront, resist, or challenge the way dominant models express themselves spatially.

Taking this background into account, this paper is a reflection upon the documentary *In the Pit* (2006), directed by Juan Carlos Rulfo that explores the possibility of considering this audiovisual portrayal as a filming endeavor that, to some degree, constitutes a counter hegemonic vision representing the world of construction workers. It concretely portrays a small group of construction workers who participated in building the Mexico City Belt Highway (Distribuidor Vial de la Ciudad de México)—colloquially referred to as the “Second Floor” of the peripheral highway—a mega-transportation construction, symbolizing urban development, erected during the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as mayor of the capital city of Mexico (2000-2005).

It is important to note that construction workers have not been represented as a group in the history of Mexican architecture (nor in social history). The figure of the construction worker has remained voiceless both in the official discourse of urban development and in the historiographies of Mexican architecture. The omission of the figure of the construction worker, an essential element to reflect upon urban history and Mexican architecture responds, among other factors, to the existence of an architectural historiography that usually elaborates its history from two perspectives: a biographical perspective in which construction is originated and depends directly on the figure of the architect and another perspective devoted to studies about specific works detailing the construction work and the socio-spatial context of the work.¹

Although outstanding social and cultural histories of Mexican architecture have been published, a review of the recent publications issued by publishing houses specializing in the history of architecture reflect the prevalence of this historiographic paradigm. In the face of architectural and urban history’s indifference toward their central labor force, the few studies regarding the construction worker’s guild come from other fields such as anthropology or sociology.² Given the lack of narratives by and about construction workers, it is germane to address a representation such as that constructed in the documentary *In the Pit* in order to be able to understand significant aspects of the work carried out by construction workers, on the one hand, and question the ways in which this subalternate group is represented within the context of the construction of a hegemonic architectural public work.

The point of departure to approach this documentary was a set of key notions regarding visual studies that could help to value the counter hegemonic sense expressed in moving images. It should be noted that for this field of study, visual representations, rather than images, are social practices “held in place by an implicit and shared repertoire of beliefs and values that sustain the accumulation of more or less stabilized and more or less hegemonic cash-ridden load-bearing structures, symbolizing capital” (Brea, 2009, p. 5, our translation). Of course, this depends on the context in which the visual representations are found. Visual studies take an interest in the act of seeing that is conditioned and constructed both culturally and politically. These two factors are therefore essential for a visuality that is not only constituted, according to Mirzoeff (2016, p. 34), by “unique visual perceptions,” since it encompasses a universe of relationships that combine “information, imagination, and reflection in order to generate a panorama that is both physical and psychic.”

José Luis Brea proposes that visuality evidences “subjectivation and socialization effects that the processes of identification/differentiation emerging from mobile hegemonic, minority, counter hegemonic imaginaries” (Brea, 2009, p. 7, our translation). For Mirzoeff, it is necessary to confront the visual mechanisms upon which the exercise of power lies during specific historical times. This exercise creates countervisualities, i.e., “a variety of realistic formats structured around a double

¹ I have developed this theme, specifically regarding the historiography of modern Mexican architecture, in *Katzman, Manrique y Obregón Santacilia: tres aportes historiográficos a la arquitectura contemporánea mexicana* and *Nociones de lo moderno en la historiografía cultural de la arquitectura del siglo XX. La obra escrita de Carlos Obregón Santacilia*.

² See the sociological and anthropological studies presented by Dimitri Germidis, *El trabajo y las relaciones laborales en la industria mexicana de la construcción* (Mexico, El Colegio de México, 1974); Carmen Bueno, *Flor de andamio: los oficios de la construcción de vivienda en la ciudad de México* (Mexico, CIESAS, 1994) and Antonio Ziri6n, *La construcción de habitar. Transformaci6n del espacio y cultura albañil en la ciudad de México a principios del siglo XXI* (Mexico, Juan Pablos Editor, 2013). Other valuable contributions are the thesis presented by Elvira Fabila, *Los trabajadores no calificados de la industria de la construcción de los ejes viales en el D.F.* (BA thesis in Sociology. ENEP Acatlán. UNAM, 1983); Norma Angélica Montes, *Artífices de la urbe: los trabajadores de la industria de la construcción en la Ciudad de México, 1970-1982* (BA thesis in History. ENEP Acatlán. UNAM, 2017).

tension: on the one hand, the need to grasp and oppose a reality that exists when it should not exist and, on the other hand, the arrival of another reality that would need to materialize even though it is still in process” (2016, p. 35, our translation). In a certain way, the use of countervisuality implies disobeying the hegemonic discourse: visual studies intimate that it is well worth paying attention to those precise areas in which hegemony claims that there is nothing to see. In analyzing this film, the inquiry process led to the world of construction workers and to try to understand how it is that an assemblage of images formatted as a documentary records and interprets a concrete event, in this case, the construction of an elevated highway above the peripheral highway.

2 *In the Pit*

The first image of the documentary is that of a man trapped in a narrow and deep pit. It is nighttime. From above, his co-workers light the scene and ask him to keep calm. The trapped worker ties a rope around his waist and his co-workers pull him to the surface. This is the first allusion to a pit, the element that inspired the film title. It is perhaps also a metaphor for one of the proposals underpinning this audiovisual work: to shed light on the work carried out by construction workers, men who have to descend to the depths of the works they construct and whose labor is hardly noticed or acknowledged. When in 2003, Juan Carlos Rulfo witnessed an urban landscape morph due to the new road works that were being constructed in the city, he decided to record the process of this transformation from the perspective of the construction workers building the elevated segment above the peripheral highway. The director explained:

[...] my intention was that when people used the elevated highway they would think about the construction workers and visualize their faces and personalities; that they would envision the life stories they shared, in their own way of narrating things and using their own jargon, so that we could get closer to the people who make constructions possible. The moment I saw them dig these pits in the life or construction of a city, I felt compelled to bring audiences closer to those who one way or another are far away. Of all the Mexican people, this group of workers are in charge of materializing reality and, nonetheless, we are so far from them. Construction workers are even far away from each other because there is no ongoing representation of their histories nor of their everyday life (FICM, 2021, our translation).

In order to implement this project, Rulfo descended into one of those holes where the cement supports became anchored. There he accompanied—or followed—during a few months the daily work of various workers. The construction workers speak directly to the camera, share their opinions about life in general, and refer to their yearnings and frustrations. They address the director, who using the camera as an eye and testimony tries unsuccessfully to be invisible.

Thus, speaks, for example, Isabel Dolores Hernández, alias “Chabelo,” an amicable man who operates a crane (see figure 1). We see him when he arrives to work, changes into work clothes, and descends into the hole. He comments that life is good, that his only concern is to have work and food, and that he must take advantage of every single opportunity. José Guadalupe Calzada, nicknamed “El Grande” (The Big One), narrates that, for more than a decade, he has worked in construction, which he refers to as “this Hell.” He is a mechanic, in charge of raising rebar structures and maneuvering. He does a little bit of everything. He jokes and swears. In the past, he broke the law and perhaps that experience brought him to the conclusion that corruption is the only way to climb the social ladder: “Honesty brings you only beans and eggs... those who study, study in order to learn how to steal.” *El Grande* is not afraid of heights; instead, he is afraid of not having money to buy food. Agustín, a driver who transports prefabricated concrete structures, rambles about love, as he drives a semi-trailer truck and gives orders to the drivers around him through a loudspeaker.



Fig. 1 Isabel Dolores Hernández, alias “Chabelo.” Photograph by Ana Lorena Ochoa, courtesy of La Media Luna Productions, 2006. Available at: https://lamedialuna.mx/producciones/en_el_hoyo. Accessed on November 9, 2022

Throughout the film, the spectator can observe how Rulfo’s camera, which started documenting the depth of the hole, gradually follows the progress of the work, until it emerges at the surface and continues its ascent to the heights. From there, the spectator witnesses how the urban landscape morphs drastically. A kind of euphoria possesses the structural iron workers; these workers are assigned the task of braiding the rebar that forms the pillars’ structural framework. They shout down challenging the director: “Come on up here and see what it feels like!” They are intrepid, climb with minimal security measures, work swiftly, and claim to have no fear of the forty-meter height that separates them from the ground. One of them, Vicencio Martínez, the foreman, shares his dream of working until he turns 32 to then retire to his ranch to take care of cows. This character represents an interesting case. The film director follows him to his ranch, where we see him wearing cowboy gear and taming wild horses. For a while, the documentary abandons the urban landscape and focuses on the private life of the worker. On the one hand, the film portrays the intimate link between the urban construction worker and his rural background, while, on the other hand, it highlights the characteristics of a complex multilayered subjectivity constantly changing location. As Antonio Ziri6n (2017, p. 162, our translation) explains, “Rather than remaining in one fixed place, it is common for workers in this guild to be in transit, in flux, displaced, and shifting between one place and the next. They are multilayered, multilocated subjects.”

Within this film’s framework, these fragments or careful portrayals of workers and their surroundings, constitute the warp and weft of what we can understand as the construction workers’ culture. In the film, it is understood as a cultural matrix, i.e., “a series of experiences shared by the construction workers that confer common cultural characteristics” (Ziri6n, 2017, p. 160, our translation), including, among other things, their musical tastes, food habits, and customary card-playing, use of slang, and knowledge of the techniques corresponding to their profession.

Within this context, the characters that parade across the screen sharing ideas about life, work or love, speak to us in the midst of a chaotic environment in which the noise of the work mixes with that of heavy traffic, revealing the entropy of urban order. It is worth recalling that the workers are building a mega traffic-related project emblematic of Andr6s Manuel L6pez Obrador’s term as mayor of the city (2000-2005). By 2002, when the elevated highway project was announced (known in Spanish as *Segundo piso sobre el Anillo Perif6rico y el Viaducto Miguel Alem6n*), Mexico City had been suffering many decades of stifling mobility problems. The accelerated and disorganized growth of this megalopolis, an inefficient system of public transportation, and an index of sustained and increasing motorization had caused the problem of environmental pollution accompanied by countless traffic-related social evils. In particular, the excessive time absorbed by transportation within the city evidences the inequality gap in terms of people’s capacity to move around.

The elevated highway was targeted to improve traffic circulation between San Antonio Avenue and the Peripheral Highway, increasing the driving speed by “300%, from 15 to 45 kmph,” thus benefiting inhabitants “of the eastern, western, and southern zones of the city who travel every day along Revoluci6n and Patriotismo Avenues” (Bord6n; Adalid, 2003, our translation). This large-scale public transit work was questioned since the beginning, not only because of the lack of

accountability regarding cost and the contracts it generated,³ but also because of its minimal social relevance, a warning expressed in several studies. The main users of the Peripheral Highway are private car drivers, “a minority sector, 17% of the total number of inhabitants of the metropolis, with higher income, living in the southwest and working in the northwest.” This sector contrasts with the majority of the population in the capital city, “13% of whom use the subway and another 55% use collective transportation, which is the most heavily polluting” (Delgado et. al., 2003, p. 50, our translation). The elevated segment of the Peripheral Highway was a public work that, far from promoting an equalizing form of transport, such as the use of public transportation, promoted and privileged private car use. Similarly, specialists informed that the positive impact on the environmental would most likely be minimal:

[...] it would be able to reduce almost 6,000 tons of polluting emissions per year, out of an approximate total of 2,492,000 tons. On the contrary, during the first year, it would imply a considerable saving of 13,911 man-hours per day, taking into account an increase of 1.1% of the national stock of vehicles plus a 3% increase of traffic induced over a projected 18-year period” (Delgado et al., 2003, p. 61, our translation).

The history of the elevated highway the spectator witnesses being constructed on screen is that of a colossal project based on and supported by the private car ideology, accompanied by the urban uses and values that are of interest to the dominant groups who have access to this technology.

3 Seeing the Elevated Segment of the Peripheral Highway

Far from ignoring the hegemonic narrative of this public work, *In the Pit*, in fact, uses film language to portray this narrative in a supportive way. The testimonies of the construction workers who speak to the camera and the images that carefully detail their daily life in the world of construction, as can be observed in figure 2, combine with vast general shots that try to show the dimensions of an unending megalopolis. Some of those images generate high quality urban compositions in which the workers become diminutive figures compared with the iron frameworks they are erecting. The film thus establishes that the two spaces that it portrays: the hegemonic elevated segment of the peripheral highway and the counterhegemonic hole, depend on each other to be able to exist. Without workers, there would be no elevated highway, and vice versa.



Fig. 2: Construction workers building the elevated highway. Photograph by Ana Lorena Ochoa, courtesy of La Media Luna Productions, 2006. Available at https://lamedialuna.mx/producciones/en_el_hoyo. Accessed on November 9, 2022

The film highlights sequences in fast motion (time-lapse photography) which compacts urban time to allow the spectator to witness how the days pass and the pillars are raised among unceasing traffic (see figure 3). In those sequences, out of the noise produced by the city and the work (hammering, bulldozers, traffic, sirens, and the work itself), emerges a sound track of electronic rhythms, a composition of Leonardo Heiblum that enhances the aesthetics of the scene. Such resources, which

³ See S. Dolútskaya (2018) “Las obras viales en el Distrito Federal (1976-2012). Los efectos de la democratización sobre el modo de gobernanza” in Le Galés, P. and Ugalde V. *Gobernando la Ciudad de México. Lo que se gobierna y lo que no se gobierna en una gran metrópoli*. El Colegio de México.

may remind the spectator of commercials or videoclips, describe a hegemonic visual regime related to widely disseminated mass media representations. This idea reaches its peak expression during the film's final sequence, an aerial shot in which we see the full extension of the elevated highway throughout more than six minutes. The construction is imposing, the city unfathomable, and the workers diminutive.



Fig. 3: Two shots of the elevated highway. The photo on the left reminds us of images widely disseminated by the mass media. The one on the right corresponds to the final aerial shot with which the documentary concludes. Source: shots from *In the Pit*, 2006

In contrast with this elevated highway that pierces the heights of the city, this film seeks to represent the construction workers in a gaping hole in the ground. In spite of a few moments in which the documentary constructs the elevated highway using hegemonic visuality, it is possible to consider the hole as a liminal space: a site that is in the process of laying the foundations of a hegemonic spatial public work. However, in the meantime, while it is still under construction, it opens up in an extraordinary way, enabling the director to record the social interaction, usually rendered invisible by the rest of society. This pit is a transcendental in-between space, akin to that described by Homi Bhabha as a site for exploration and confusion, where space and time intertwine in order to “produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion and inclusion” (1994, p. 1). This threshold, a liminal space, has opened up temporarily (the spectator becomes aware that once the work is completed, this hole will no longer exist). It is precisely this emergent nature that, according to Bhabha, elicits a critique and a negotiation of signs of identity. According to Bhabha, “[i]t is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

Symbolically, the image of the hole expresses a tension between what exists outside and what exists inside. It is perhaps time that evidences this paradoxical tension more clearly. The city's accelerated time outside dramatically contrasts with the attention to detail inside the hole. To dwell “in the beyond” implies “be[ing] part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity...” intervening “in the here and now” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7) in order to reinscribe this omission or make it visible. This is also a task of contemporaneity. We must live in the moment. Agustín, one of the construction workers in the film, reminds the spectator of this: “We must try to do what we can in the moment since we never know whether we will be able to do it tomorrow.”

4 Final Considerations

The critique this documentary has received is divided between comments that praise its ethnographic qualities and social sensibility (Canclini, 2006; Ziri6n, 2017) and others who consider that the life of the construction worker gets diluted next to Rulfo's grand visual elegies to the urban landscape (Morris, 2007). However, one of the most interesting points is his creation of symbolic tension between the visual portrayal of the elevated highway, a work that represents the dominant visual regime in an attempt to express the hegemonic value of this large-scale work, and, the potentiality of having countervisuality emerge through focusing on micro scale. This micro scale represents how this subalternate group lives the present moment, the logic ruling their existence, and the strategies that this guild adopts in order to face a hegemonic organizational model: time for rest and relaxation, closeness and solidarity, ongoing examples of community sharing, the complexity of constantly being on the move, the multi-locality of work.

Even though this documentary could function as a record of a grandiloquent and monumental construction, to glance into the hole—the space in which the workers dwell ‘in the beyond’—evidences that this elevated structure, albeit having been designed to join areas of the city and bring citizens closer to their destination, on the contrary, only increases the distance between inhabitants and widens the social gap. As *El Grande* states in the film’s final scene: “It’s looking nice, but it’s a pity that I’ll never be able to use this damn highway because I don’t even have a bike.”

Using counterpositions appearing in the documentary *En el hoyo*, such as depth-surface, inside-outside, visible-invisible, this paper shows some of the mechanisms that visibilize the daily collision between the hegemonic and the counterhegemonic in the urban sphere. In this initial approach to this audiovisual material, it highlighted the relationship between hegemonic and counter hegemonic visions. The grandiosity of this large-scale work for the use of a dominant class contrasts with the everyday life of the actual builders who will not be able to enjoy what they built. This mirrors the daily life in a megacity. Even though the film does not pay attention to issues regarding the organization or decision-making on the part of the construction workers in order to deconstruct or transform the hegemonic content of the reality in which they are engaged, the workers’ small gestures provide the spectator with a glimpse of mechanisms to defy the dominant hegemonic ideology. In the face of a general panorama that for decades has ignored the labor of construction workers, this audiovisual work could be considered an effort to address his situation. A future work remains to be attempted, to analyze the role played by the film director as observer/participant, by placing himself as the one who gives voice to the characters and thus becomes one of them. Perhaps this presence could in some way motivate the workers to become agents of counter hegemonic transformation.

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